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Playing It Safe: UB Alumnus Bernard A. Tolbert, the NBA's Security Chief, Addresses New York City Alumni Luncheon

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Alumni Association

"In today's environment, we have to do those things that we can do to make sure that we don't allow terrorists to have an unnecessarily negative impact on what we do."

— Bernard A. Tolbert

Playing it safe

UB alumnus Bernard A. Tolbert, the NBA's security chief, addresses New York City alumni luncheon

In a city forever changed by terrorism, UB Law School's New York City alumni gathered on Jan. 24 to hear a UB alumnus describe the challenges of trying to make American life more secure.

Bernard A. Tolbert, formerly special agent in charge of the Buffalo Division of the FBI, is now chief of security for the National Basketball Association. He faces an unenviable task: to ensure the safety of fans, staff and players over the course of the NBA's long season, in a worldwide climate of terrorist attacks designed for maximum psychological impact.

At a luncheon gathering in Manhattan's Union League Club, Tolbert began by pointing out how quickly the nation has had to become accustomed to inconveniences designed to ensure our security. "We have now started to accept things as a daily routine that I said 10 years ago we would have to adopt in order to make ourselves safer," he said — from security searches, to long waiting lines to get into buildings.

"It is a way of life that has been brought about, quite frankly, by terrorism," Tolbert said. "Our personal isolation from terrorist incidents has been shattered. No longer can we feel safe in the confines of our own borders."

In the United States and Canada, he noted, the year 2000 saw no terrorist attacks and no casualties. In 2001, FBI statistics show, there were 3,235 casualties as a result of terrorism, mostly from the attack on the World Trade Center.

Even our diversions have been affected — including the NBA. "For those involved in putting on the game," Tol-





Emphasizing that no information points to a specific targeting of the NBA by any terrorist group, Tolbert nevertheless acknowledged that major-league sports make a tempting target for America's enemies.

bert said, "especially from a security standpoint, we now spend a great deal of time concerning ourselves with how we can put the game on safely so you, the fans, can enjoy it. While some of the security concerns like crowd control, scalpers and unruly fans have always been considerations, we now find ourselves looking at issues like potential suicide bombers, the vulnerability of heating and air conditioning intake systems, vehicle bombs and safety in the food supply chain. These are just a few of the serious concerns that we have to address at every game we put on."

Emphasizing that no information points to a specific targeting of the NBA by any terrorist group, Tolbert nevertheless acknowledged that major-league sports make a tempting target for America's enemies. "Terrorists want to perpetrate their acts in a way that has a major impact," he said. "They want an audience. They want a lot of people to see what they do. So surely they are going to be attacking high-profile events, and major-league sporting events are certainly that."

In response, he said, besides stringent security checks at all games, the NBA has instituted stringent background checks for "anyone who touches our game in any way," including high officials and media.

"The task that we have is a difficult one," Tolbert said, "but like many other areas in our society, in today's environment, we have to do those things that we can do to make sure that we don't allow terrorists to have an unnecessarily negative impact on what we do."

In response to a question about how private citizens can help ensure the pub-



Above left: Kenneth A. Manning '77 and Hon. Barbara Howe '80
Above: Evelyn R. Agnant '02, left, and Rashondra M. Jackson '02
Far left: Neil S. Cartusciello '78
Left: John P. Deveney '77

lic's safety, Tolbert advised, "I think we can all be reasonable in what we do. Do not overreact to things, but at the same time, if you see things that do not make sense, tell us about it and let us decide whether it is worth investigating. Maybe it is something isolated, but put it together with other pieces of information and it is an important piece of a puzzle. Recognize that there are people out there who do not like us just because we are Americans."

On a happier note, Tolbert paid tribute to his alma mater by saying: "I cannot begin to tell you how fortunate I feel to

have gone to the University at Buffalo. It is not very often that we can look back on our lives and at a particular time and a particular event and identify it later as a defining moment in one's life. I can say that about my very unique moment at UB. It is a moment that has been indelibly marked in my psyche and plays a very important role in all that I do."